Girl Power! Lessons Learned from Active Engagement with a Primary Prevention Program Focused on Girls

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Community psychology has a wealth of theories, guiding principles, and tenets that apply to mentoring young girls. Translating those theories into action comes with some anticipated hurdles as well as some unforeseen obstacles. In this article, lessons learned from our work as evaluation consultants with a “Girl Power!” program will be explored.

Our work involved collaborating with a community health coalition comprised, in part, of the local school boards, the park district, and a hospital. We provided evaluation consultations for two consecutive summers for a program consisting of 121 mostly Black and Latino girls between ages 8-10 who participated in a summer camp program. The socioeconomic status of the community was lower middle class to low-income. The program consisted of activities five days a week from 9am-12 noon; the sessions encompassed daily subject matter, for example: leadership, trust, and self-worth as fundamental themes.

The central focus of the project was to educate girls on healthy nutritional choices and increase daily movement; but the communal significance of the camp went far beyond nutrition and uncovered the need for an all-inclusive investment in girls. There can be a push to get girls moving and eating healthy food, but they also have to understand how that will impact them in other life areas such as how eating fruits and veggies can help their skin stay clear, their hair grow and shine, and even impact their moods. The obesity epidemic does not solely rest upon people becoming overweight, but also on the fact that some lack healthy self-esteem, self-worth, or even general support from others to make beneficial choices in any area of their lives. For that reason, despite
our role as evaluators we saw a need to be an active part of the programming, specifically
to encourage consideration of a strengths-based focus on the whole child, including their
individual strengths and power-base. Multiple levels of influence were also considered,
specifically how their personal decisions, choices, and abilities intersected with family,
community, and society.

Based on our active engagement with program staff and the girls, we learned some
core lessons revolving around the needs to create a safe and empowering environment
and the power of collective affirmation on self-efficacy (and perhaps collective efficacy
as well).

**Creating a Safe and Empowering Environment**

*Creating a safe and empowering environment is a principal factor in*

*establishing trust.* When the girls came to the camp, most of them had never had any
interaction with one another. With the exception of a handful of girls coming in pairs, the
majority came alone. Our intention was to create a safe and supportive environment
where the girls would feel comfortable enough to participate in the planned activities.
While we were deliberate in creating exercises that would build teamwork, we also
emphasized each girl’s uniqueness and intentionally created exercises around
individuality. One of the individual activities we had the girls do was share their feelings
about participating in the camp -- sharing if they wanted to be there or not, and letting
them know that it was not a problem if they did not want to be there. This created
individualism and empowered the girls to be honest without consequence. We then paired
them and had them share something about themselves with their partner. They then had
to share with the entire group what they learned of their partner. A sense of appreciation appeared to form in the eyes of the girls when they recognized that they had similarities with their partner. This icebreaker led to building community amongst the members.

Setting the tone for a healthy and safe atmosphere provided a framework to **empower** the girls and **give them voice**. Creating a safe zone of trust included the ability to create a climate that was inclusive, engaging, and structured. It was incredible to see the girls open up and begin to communicate their inner feelings. It appeared that the environment was supportive and non-judgmental, thus creating an aura of security, camaraderie, and trust.

**The Power of Collective Affirmation on Self- and Collective Efficacy**

One way to create positive groupthink, which helped to build collective efficacy, was having girls recite a pledge **on the strength of being a girl**. The girls were able to identify a sense of self-worth through the power of the pledge and saying it out loud on a daily basis. The pledge engendered a sense of self-worth by giving power to the participant’s voice as they spoke the words out loud daily. The pledge was thought-provoking, inspiring, and filled with empowering affirmations that touched their inner being and gave a sense of permission to be empowered. While reciting the pledge, the girls expressed their authority and screamed the affirming words of being a girl: this **seemed to strengthen them as individuals and even as a group**. They hugged, smiled, and laughed while reciting the pledge. Each day’s recitation was louder, stronger, and more robust. Their sense of self-efficacy was energized from within, thus causing a chain
reaction and a collective affirming group of 8-10 year-old girls from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Although we believe the pledge was a critical component, it appears the intentional creation of community/togetherness was necessary. Our approach, which appears to be effective, was to pair the girls into groups of two, then into small groups, and finally back into the collective cluster where even the more introverted girls were able to bond and create a community of togetherness. They appeared to have gained power from being together and getting to know one another. There seemed to be an awareness, appreciation, and consciousness from each other during some of the activities (i.e. the shoe game and the getting-to-know you game). This collective thought process was a contributing factor in reinforcing groupthink in a positive way. The power of community brings about solidarity and may play a critical role in fostering the improvement of a healthy lifestyle for the girls. We acknowledge the role of health and diet in relation to obesity, but we suggest that the power of the group is a critical component to any long-lasting change at both the individual and community level.

As individuals, in the beginning of the program, the girls were frightened and timid. As a group, they became strong and powerful. They memorized the Girl Pledge and were screaming “Girl Power!” within one day. They were 8-10 year-old girls realizing that they had internal and external strength that was powerful beyond measure. They only needed the structure and guidance of a safe, healthy, and positive atmosphere to learn, grow and change – and this gave them the individual and collective voice, control, tools, and opportunity to feel Girl Power!
The lessons learned from Girl Power! can be applied to many forms of mentoring programs including, but not limited to, healthy lifestyles and obesity prevention programs. One such example includes work at the Girls of Grace Youth Organization founded by Wytress Richardson (co-author) in 2007, designed to encourage holistic development of girls between the ages of 8-18. Over the past seven years Girls of Grace has helped over 100 girls throughout the Chicagoland area find value in themselves, build their confidence and provide leadership development through mentoring. The lessons learned from Girl Power can be extended directly to Girls of Grace and other after-school and week-end programs that provide structured community and age-appropriate activities.

This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.